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AUTHOR Beale, Claudette J.; Baskin, David
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ABSTRACT

A quasi-random sample of 58 children ranging from 6 to 12 years of age was administered a questionnaire consisting of 38 items designed to identify persons and things that they feared, that made them uncomfortable, and that they disliked. Children in the sample were either Black or Hispanic; distribution of males and females was uniform. While some subjects filled out a questionnaire individually, over 95% of participants had low reading abilities and were administered the questionnaire by an interviewer. Differences and similarities between male and female subjects are discussed, and areas for further inquiry are suggested. (Author/RH)

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CHILDREN'S FEARS: WHO'S AFRAID OF THE BIG BAD WOLF?

Claudette J. Beale
Quality Assurance Analyst
Crotona Park CMHC
Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center
1770 Grand Concourse
Bronx, New York 10457
Suite 2A

David Baskin, Ph.D.
Chief, Program Evaluation
Crotona Park CMHC
Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center
1770 Grand Concourse
Bronx, New York 10457
Suite 2A

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ABSTRACT

Children and adolescents may be subject to a great deal of stress in our anxiety-laden society. A quasi-random sample of over 50 children ranging from 6 - 12 years of age, were administered a questionnaire, the purpose of which was to identify their a) fears, b) likes and dislikes, c) things that made them uncomfortable. Differences and similarities betweenmale & femalesare discussed in detail. Areas for further inquiry are put forth and a suggestion is made to administer this type of questionnaire to all children on a regular basis, with consideration to the different types of geographical regions (urban, rural or suburban).

Introduction

There has been much research done on the period of a person's life which is often referred to as the "stormy years", adolescence. Little however can be found concerning feelings and fears for those years of a person's life leading up to adolescence, the middle years, 6 - 12 or even the years prior to that when a child's growth and development seem to be quite accelerated. What fears, strains, likes, dislikes or uncomfortable feelings do children experience that they don't always share with adults? Studies done in this area use input primarily from adults, i.e., what they perceive as fears of children. Often a child is not willing to admit that he or she is afraid of something or someone but will readily admit that they either dislike or are uncomfortable around that person or thing. We have attempted to create a questionnaire which taps not only fears, but likes and dislikes of children, and also allows children to add other items which may not already be included.

Are the issues we as adults perceive as fears also perceived as fears by our children? Do children have fears which they are not readily willing to share with adults? Do children's fears, dislikes and uncomfortable feelings change in different developmental stages or do many of them remain the same, and is that child as he or she gets older less willing to admit, for example, that even during adolescence they are still afraid of the dark? By exploring more of this area of a child's life,

perhaps we can more readily identify some of the reasons for his or her behavior during adolescence.

This paper targets the 6 - 12 age group, the pre-adolescent. With the accelerated growth and development of our children today, is the 6 - 12 year old, especially the 10, 11 & 12 year olds, still considered to be pre-adolescent or are some of them now starting what has been previously considered adolescence (13-17) at an earlier age.

Review of the Literature

As adults, we may not readily perceive the average child's life as being very stressful. Yamamoto (1979) administered a questionnaire of 20 life events identified as potentially unpleasant for children, to over 300 4th, 5th and 6th grade boys and girls in six southwestern metropolitan schools. The purpose was to ascertain whether they differentially assess the stressfulness of varied experiences and if their appraisal generally agrees with that of adults. Results showed that children rate as most upsetting the loss of a parent. There were no statistically significant differences associated with grade, sex or personal experience. What was significant was that the judgments the children made of perceived stress often differed from those of professionals.

Do parents really know and understand their children's fears? Do certain fears change to others as children mature or

do they retain some of those same fears as adults? Miller et al. (1972) administered the Louisville Fear Survey for Children to the parents of 179 male and female children ranging in age from 6 to 16. The children were rated by their parents based on the child's manifest behavior observed within the home and family. The sampling of children were from the clinical and general population. The three outstanding factors as observed by the parents were physical injury, natural events (storms, earthquakes, etc.) and psychic stress (fears of tests, social events, doctor, school, etc.).

Do children's fears relate more to the areas in which they live or their specific environment? Pratt (1945) conducted a study of fears of rural children. 570 boys and girls between the ages of 4 and 15 were administered survey questionnaires. Instead of suggesting specific fears to the children, they were asked to write down all the things they were afraid of and then to select the three things that they were most afraid of. It was discovered that more than 65% of the sample had fears of animals as opposed to urban children whose percentage was demonstrably lower.

LaPouse & Monk (1959) administered a questionnaire to the mothers of almost 500 children ranging from 6 - 12 years of age in Buffalo, probing children's fears and worries as reported by their mothers. Also a group of almost 200 mothers and children were interviewed separately and simultaneously to assess primarily the correlation of responses between mother and child.

Both groups were in agreement more than 70% of the time concerning specific fears and worries, but the children reported more fears and worries than most mothers.

Method

The sample consisted of fifty-eight children between the ages of 6 and 12. They were administered questionnaires designed and worded for their appropriate age group. The sample was obtained mostly from a summer Day Camp located in the upper part of the East Bronx in multi-unit cooperative complexes. Some of the sample was also drawn from the children of friends and associates. All of the children were of either Black or Hispanic origin, the majority of them being Black. The group, depending upon their reading ability, were either interviewed individually or were asked to fill out the questionnaire themselves. More than 95% of them were administered the questionnaire by an interviewer.

The questionnaire consisted of three areas: 1) persons/things that they were afraid of, 2) persons/things that made them uncomfortable and 3) persons/things that they disliked. They were told prior to being asked the questions that the questions they would be answering would not be shown to their parents or anyone else that they knew. Several of them admitted their concern about this and appeared to relax more after being told this.

Responses were tabulated, comparing male and female Ss.

The distribution of males and females was uniform in the sample (i.e. 29 in each group). The average age of the males was 9.1; that of the females was 9.2. The average grade for the boys was 4.4; for the girls it was 4.6. The ethnic distribution was as follows: 23 black Ss in each group, 6 Hispanic-American Ss in each.

RESULT

The subjects were asked about a variety of 38 different items that might invoke fear for them. The items, both male and female ranks and the number for each gender group is presented in Table I. The items that invoked the most fear in the boys were as follows: one's parents dying, parent getting divorced, "crazy" people, and dying. For the girls the items that invoked the most fear were: one's parents dying, drug addicts and drunken people. It was interesting to note that fear of one's parents dying exceeded fear of the Ss dying both for boys and girls. For the girls it would seem as if the potential for physical violence from drug addicts or inebriated people was greater than that for the boys. While there were some differences between the gender rankings, by and large the profile of potential fears was somewhat similar. Being left alone seemed to invoke more fear in the girls whereas being hospitalized or reciting in class or not being accepted by one's friends was ranked higher for the boys. It was not surprising to note that fear of not growing taller was greater for boys than for girls and the stereotype of girls fear of horror films was affirmed by the findings.

Subjects were asked what things they dislike from an array of 21 items. Results are displayed in Table II. The boys feel that being poor, having

TABLE I. ITEMS THAT INVOKE FEAR

ITEMS	MALE RANK	NUMBER	FEMALE RANK	NUMBER
One's parents dying	1	23	1	27
Parents getting divorced	2	20	9	19
"Crazy" people	3	19	8	20
Of dying	3	19	6	22
Guns/knives	4	17	4	24
Strangers	5	16	6	22
Getting lost	6	15	7	21
Drug addicts	6	15	2	26
Going to a new school	6	15	5	23
Drunk people	7	14	3	25
One's parents fighting	7	14	8	20
Parent/teacher meetings	7	14	16	9
Going to school on the bus or subway alone	8	12	8	20
Certain courses in school	8	12	15	10
Failing in school	9	11	11	14
Not being promoted to the next grade	9	11	13	12
Being hospitalized	10	10	14	11
Reciting in class	11	9	18	7
Taking exams	12	8	12	13
Not being accepted by one's friends	12	8	19	6
Going to the doctor	13	7	18	7
Being left alone	13	7	6	22
Not growing tall like one's friends	13	7	20	5
Friends finding out that one is afraid	13	7	13	11
Horror movies	14	6	7	21
Being spanked	14	6	17	8
Getting beat up	15	4	10	18
Going to the dentist	15	4	20	5
The dark	16	3	19	6
Other	16	3	14	11
Crossing the street	17	2	21	1
Some of one's relatives	17	2	23	--
Girls	18	1	23	--
Boys	19	0	21	2

TABLE II. ITEMS THAT Ss DO NOT LIKE

ITEMS	MALE RANK	NUMBER	FEMALE RANK	NUMBER
Being poor	1	19	4	12
Having to get up in the morning	2	16	1	24
People telling one, that you are too young	3	13	2	15
Some of one's classes	4	12	2	15
Doing homework	5	9	3	13
Sharing a room with one's brother or sister	6	9	3	13
Doing chores around the house	7	8	6	9
Wearing eyeglasses	7	8	5	11
Wearing braces	8	7	7	7
School	9	6	6	9
Having to take care of brothers and sisters	9	6	8	6
Teacher(s)	10	5	7	7
Being made to go to church	11	4	10	2
Girls	12	2	12	--
Rich classmates	12	2	9	3
Parent(s)	13	1	11	1
Eating	13	1	11	1
Going to parties	13	1	10	2
Boys/Girls that are more popular than self	13	1	9	3
The way one's home looks	13	1	11	1
Boys	14	0	5	11

TABLE III. THINGS THAT MAKE Ss FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE

Undressing to be examined by a doctor of opposite sex	1	12	2	14
Talking to parent(s) about sex	2	9	1	17
Being smaller than one's friends	2	9	3	11
Being around girls	3	6	6	0
Being bigger than one's friends	3	6	4	5
Having parents that look very old	4	3	5	3
Being around boys	5	1	1	17

to get up in the morning and people telling one that"you are too young" were the things that they most disliked. The girls, on the other hand, deemed having to get up in the morning as the thing they disliked most, followed by people telling one that you are too young and some of one's classes. Again there were overall similarities in the ranking profiles but the girls ranking of teachers indicated that they disliked teachers more and also had a greater dislike for boys and girls who are more popular than themselves. It was also clear that the girls disliked boys more than the reverse.

Subjects were asked about 7 items which might make them feel uncomfortable. Results are displayed in Table III and indicate that the item that makes boys feel more uncomfortable is being undressed to be examined by a doctor of the opposite sex, whereas for girls talking to parent(s) about sex was the thing that made them more uncomfortable. Girls also expressed the feeling that being around boys also made them uncomfortable.

Content analyses of some of the responses indicated that the fear associated with doctors focused primarily on the fear of needles used for injections and also the fear of being ill. The fear associated with dentists was also pinpointed to the fear of drilling. One subject expressed a fear of teeth being pulled but it was difficult to ascertain whether this was based on actual personal experience or whether it was something that the subject had seen with adult patients. Among the courses invoking fear mathematics, science and social studies were the most frequently listed subjects.

DISCUSSION

There was no statistically different significance in either the age or grade of male and female subjects, nor was there a difference in the overall ethnic distribution of the two groups. However, it would be efficacious in future studies to obtain a greater ethnic variation and to compare subjects responses from different regions across the country. We did not compute a test-retest reliability coefficient and this too would be worthwhile to determine. It would also be informative to administer this questionnaire to the same subjects after a lapse of time in order to learn whether there is change in fears experienced.

It was quite surprising to learn that a fear of one's parents dying seemed to be greater than fear of one's self dying. Perhaps children have a great deal of difficulty in conceptualizing their own death whereas the fear that one's own parents may die represents the dependency of children on their parents for both emotional and other support. Girls may be particularly fearful of drug addicts and inebriated people because of the fear of what these individuals may perpetrate upon themselves; hence it may be a very realistic fear particularly for children living in a metropolitan urban community. Whether this would be replicated in samples of children living in exurban communities remains open for future exploration. Nonetheless the whole area of death and dying should perhaps be an area for academic discussion. It is ironic that sex education is also placed in the scholastic curriculum while the natural phenomenon of dying is still a taboo. Teachers and other related school personnel may not know how to deal with their own fears regarding death or may regard the subject as being insoluble or in the realm of religion. Nonetheless the denial of this subject does not

enable children to deal with this natural phenomenon.

An overwhelming response from the subjects indicated that they abhor having to wake up in the morning. The boys in particular disliked being poor. We did not obtain socioeconomic data on the subjects so that we do not know whether dislike of being poor is in fact actual. It would be enlightening to learn why girls dislike boys more than the reverse. Perhaps this is due to aggressiveness manifested by boys. One may note that despite social changes initiated by women's liberation movements, boys may still be the stereotypic aggressors.

Since undressing to be examined by a doctor of the opposite sex seemed to make the subjects feel most uncomfortable, it would seem that the logical recommendation is for children to be examined by a physician of the same sex. Despite some of the openness among parents to talk about sex with children, both boys and girls seem to have a difficulty doing so. Future studies in the field should try to disclose why this is so.

Future studies should seek to determine the relationship between fear and other variables such as independence, locus of control and achievement. To what extent are the fears listed realistic? To what extent are parents aware of their children's specific fears? How should these fears be dealt with? While a suggestion was put forth previously to have classroom discussions, there is no reason why there should not be some form of group therapy with children which utilizes verbal techniques to explore problem areas.

While the study was preliminary in nature it did afford insight into this needed area of inquiry. Many of the children expressed to the interviewers how delighted they were that at last someone was asking them personally about subjects which had been heretofore unexplored. There is no reason why many of these areas cannot be explored in individual therapy with children. Hopefully such inquiries can lead to greater understanding of children's motivations, difficulties and problems.

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